

# Is John's Gospel Ethically Defective?

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## Summary

*This paper discusses and evaluates the widespread view that John's Gospel has little ethical value and may even be responsible for fostering antisemitism. It is argued that such criticisms are misplaced and that John is, in fact, advocating the kind of unity, mutual trust and self-sacrifice that would have been necessary among believers at a time of conflict between church and synagogue. Jesus' willingness to wash the disciples' feet, the egalitarian nature of the Gospel, and the paradigmatic community of Father, Son and Spirit, are identified as role models for the kind of love Jesus commands. Although John's ethical focus is essentially inward-looking, it forms the basis for a distinctive Christian counter-culture and has important social and political implications. It is concluded that while John's ethical vision is limited, and open to being misapplied, this can be avoided by interpreting it in the light of other biblical perspectives.*

Key words: Bible, God, church, etics, Gospel of John, evangelisation, unity, love, theology.

## Introduction

If forced to choose which book of the Bible has had the greatest influence on the church and the world, a strong case could be made for the Gospel of John. This is actually rather ironic since many scholars believe this book was originally written for a sectarian Christian group, cut off from the mainstream of first century Christianity (a point I shall come back to later). Since then, however, John's Gospel has become one of the most influential and popular Christian texts. In the first four centuries, when the church was crystallizing its beliefs about Jesus,

it was John's Logos Christology that played the decisive theological role.<sup>1</sup> Equally, his Gospel has played a major role in Christian evangelism, as witnessed by the millions of copies given away in outreach, and the ubiquity of John 3:16 in evangelical merchandise. Over the last thirty years, biblical scholars have begun to appreciate the literary quality of the Fourth Gospel, especially John's use of irony.<sup>2</sup>

So John gets high marks for theology, evangelism and artistry. What about the ethical value of this Gospel? What kind of moral character does it produce in its readers? These may seem strange questions to ask about an integral part of Christian Scripture, especially given that John is often called "the apostle of love." Still, questions have been raised and doubts expressed. Many scholars would concur with J. L. Houlden's verdict that in John's Gospel, ethics is displaced by Christology: "Even when he speaks of the command to love and of doing what Jesus commands, John's real concern ... is with the new condition of life conferred on the believers through Christ" (1975, 36–37).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, he describes this Gospel as "a writing which accords a minimal role to autonomous ethics" (1975, 35). More recently, in an essay entitled "The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist", Wayne Meeks acknowledges that "as an instrument of moral formation," John's Gospel has serious deficiencies (1996, 317). According to Meeks:

The kind of ethos that the narrative of the Fourth Gospel seems designed to reinforce, when taken at face value in its historical rather than its canonical context, is not one that many of us would happily call 'Christian' ... The Fourth Gospel seems to stand opposed to some of the values that many thoughtful Christians hold (1996, 317).

To be sure, the use of the word "seems" should be noted, and, as will be seen later, Meeks goes on to show how John's Gospel can play a constructive role in shaping the church's social and political stance. Nevertheless, he is clearly aware of the limitations of the text as ethical discourse, and makes no attempt to gloss over them.

- 1 Concluding his survey of New Testament Christology, Dunn writes, "Without the Fourth Gospel all the other assertions we have been looking at would have been resolvable into more modest assertions. Of the canonical literature it is pre-eminently the Fourth Gospel which prevents Christian thought from settling for a more accommodating faith, more straightforwardly conceptualized, of Jesus simply the eschatological prophet, climax of God's revelation to man, or of Jesus simply God (or a god) appearing on earth in human guise" (Dunn, 1980, 249).
- 2 See especially Culpepper, 1983 and 1996; Duke, 1985; Stibbe, 1992; Carter, 2006, 107–128.
- 3 Houlden does not, however, criticize John for his ethical perspective: "It is unfair to disparage this as a regrettable narrowing of the broad generosity of Paul and the other Gospels ... looked at in John's perspective, it could not be otherwise; his ethics followed straight from his theological convictions" (1975, 36).

In the same year that Meeks' essay appeared, Maurice Casey published his hard-hitting and controversial book, *Is John's Gospel True?* (1996), to which his answer was an emphatic "No". Although the bulk of Casey's study is directed at proving the historical errors of the Gospel, he saves his strongest remarks for what he sees as its ethical falsehood. By misrepresenting Jesus as Israel's divine Messiah, rejected by an unbelieving people, John laid the foundation for centuries of Christian violence against Jews. Casey writes:

The fourth Gospel is vigorously anti-Jewish. This is understandable, but it is nonetheless a basic fact which makes it unsuitable for too much veneration. What is worse, this Gospel has fostered Christian anti-Semitism (1996, 3).

Towards the end of his book, Casey presents both these charges in more detail before offering the following stark conclusion:

Thus the history of Christian anti-Semitism is not only horrifyingly wicked: it is centrally deceitful. The fourth Gospel is at the centre of this deceit (1996, 228).

Clearly, then, John's Gospel has its detractors as well as its admirers, and its value for moral formation has been seriously questioned. To be sure, Casey's critique rests on a wholesale rejection of orthodox Christian beliefs (though it cannot for that reason be casually dismissed), but Houlden and Meeks are both thoughtful Christians. Precisely because this Gospel is so influential, objections to its ethical vision have to be taken seriously and considered. To do this in detail would obviously require a major study, but here I wish simply to highlight the main issues and offer some brief reflections. Despite its brevity, Meeks' essay will provide a useful framework for the discussion.<sup>4</sup>

## **John's Gospel as Ethically Defective**

First, it is a fact that the Fourth Gospel contains little or no ethical teaching. In this respect, the contrast with the Synoptic Gospels is striking. A search of John for any teaching about love for enemies, giving to the poor, sexual morality, or payment of taxes would be in vain. There is no record or equivalent of the Sermon on the Mount. Only once (20:23) does John's Jesus mention forgiveness, and what is at issue in that passage is the disciples' authority to mediate God's

4 For reasons of space, I leave aside Meeks' third point that John's Gospel depicts an "antirational" narrative world in which truth is concealed rather than communicated: "Subversion doubtless may have ethical uses in specific circumstances, but it can hardly be the foundation for ethics" (1996, 319).

forgiveness rather than inter-personal reconciliation. When Jesus castigates the Pharisees (as he does often), it is not for their lack of compassion or their religious hypocrisy (as it is in the Synoptic Gospels) but because they do not believe in him (3:10–21; 5:31–47; 8:14–58; 10:22–39) – giving a reminder of Houlden’s claim that John has replaced ethics with Christology. To be sure, Jesus insists that his disciples are to love one another (13:34–35; 15:9–17), but as D. Moody Smith remarks, such instructions “lack specificity” (1984, 178). What, in practice, does it mean to love one another?

Secondly, Meeks argues that John fails to provide “a plausible and universalizable model for behavior” (1996, 318). This idea of an ethical *model* is significant. John’s Gospel is a narrative, and the primary way in which biblical narratives advocate ethical norms is through the examples of their characters.<sup>5</sup> Again, it is not hard to see how this happens in the Synoptic Gospels. Here Jesus is growing in body, mind and spirit, being tested in the desert, eating with the marginalized, challenging taboos, setting out courageously to go to Jerusalem, protesting religious corruption, recoiling with horror at the prospect of his death, receiving fresh inner strength, and embracing his vocation to die before experiencing the victory of resurrection. Likewise, his disciples come across as real people – fallible, inconsistent, but slowly growing in faith and understanding. Such people are easy to relate to. In the Fourth Gospel, however (according to Meeks), neither Jesus nor his disciples are viable role models. The disciples appear as two-dimensional, passive characters – “mere foils to Jesus’ superior knowledge and his inscrutability”, as Meeks puts it (1996, 318). The Johannine Jesus, on the other hand,

... is too alien to human weakness to provide a convincing model, too much ‘the god striding over the face of the earth.’ ... The narrative celebrates the enigma of the Son of God who lived in human flesh and whose death was victory over the world and glorification with the Father; it does not show *us* how to live or how to die (Meeks, 1996, 318; italics his).

Such a claim may seem to overlook John’s account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet (13:1–13), an act which he explicitly describes as an example for them to follow (13:14–15). Most readers of the Gospel see here an astonishing act of humility which readers are both challenged and inspired to emulate. Meeks, however, is not impressed. John himself says that Jesus “knew that the Father had given

5 In regard to Old Testament narratives, see for example Birch, 1991, 51–60, and especially Wenham, 2000, who explores how the narratives of Genesis and Judges instill ethical ideals in their readers. He cites MacIntyre’s conclusion that “In all those cultures, Greek, medieval or Renaissance ... the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories” (MacIntyre, 1981, 114; cited by Wenham, 2000, 1, footnote 1).

all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God" (13:3).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Meeks concludes that "There is nothing really humble about this action, any more than there is when the Pope reenacts it in St. Peters on Maundy Thursday" (1996, 319).

What then of John's story of the women caught in adultery and facing the death penalty (7:53 – 8:11)? Surely this is an outstanding model for ethical behavior, as Jesus first exposes the hypocrisy of the woman's male accusers before addressing her with mercy combined with moral seriousness: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on sin no more" (8:11). The ethical power of this story can hardly be denied, which is why it is so well-known and highly admired. Unfortunately, while the story may well be true, it was almost certainly not an original part of the text.<sup>7</sup> It is missing from almost all early Greek manuscripts of John's Gospel, and none of the early church fathers seem to have known it.

These first two criticisms, taken together, suggest another: that John's ethical vision is distorted by being so inward-looking. It is *the disciples'* feet that Jesus washes, and it is *the disciples* he commands to "love one another" (13:34; 15:12, 17; note the reciprocal pronoun ἀλλήλους). The service *of believers to believers* is the theme, as underlined by Jesus' statement, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (15:13). One can hardly miss the contrast with Jesus' words to his disciples in Matt. 5:44–46: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" The impression of indifference towards outsiders is strengthened further when Jesus says to the Father, "I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me" (17:9). What kind of ethics is this? One answer would be that it is sectarian ethics. As mentioned earlier, the Fourth Gospel is often viewed as the product of a small community that had separated itself from the wider Christian movement; and it could be seen as promoting a typically sectarian ethic in which what matters is complete devotion to fellow members of the group (in John's language, "the sons of light"), rather than generous service to those outside ("the sons of darkness"). As Meeks puts it, "The 'social ethics' of the Johannine gospel almost boils down to this: resolute loyalty to the community of disciples" (1996, 323).<sup>8</sup>

6 All biblical citations in this paper are from the English Standard Version.

7 This is the unanimous view of biblical scholars, regardless of their theological stripe. For a representative sample, see Bernard, 1928, 715–716; Marsh, 1968, 681–684; Lindars, 1972, 305–307; Barrett, 1978, 589–590; Beasley-Murray, 1987, 143–144; Ramsey Michaels, 1989, 146; Carson, 1991, 333–334; Keener, 2003, 735–736. Tellingly, scholars often note that the language and tone of the story is closer to that of Luke than John.

8 For similar statements, see the authors cited by Nissen, 1999, 195.

Finally, as seen earlier, John's Gospel stands accused of promoting an anti-Semitic ideology with tragic consequences in later history. For Casey, this is the most serious charge against the Fourth Gospel (Casey, 1996, 223–229). In his view, its entire narrative, in which salvation depends on recognizing and confessing Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, inevitably results in an abusive “replacement theology”:

It is the Jewish community which is replaced by the Johannine community throughout the fourth Gospel, from the declaration of the deity and incarnation of the Word violating Jewish monotheism at the beginning, to the need for faith that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, which violates it just as securely at the end (1996, 226).<sup>9</sup>

Casey's argument here raises fundamental questions about the historical Jesus which go beyond the scope of this paper; in my view, he fails to recognize the implicit claims to being the Messiah in Jesus' words and actions, and the evidence that Jesus intended both a restoration and a redefinition of Israel.<sup>10</sup> Yet even those who do not follow Casey in this respect often find the language of the Johannine Jesus against his fellow Jews, such as in passages like 5:41–47, 7:28–29 and 8:14–56, to be unacceptably harsh and confrontational. Particularly shocking to many is the way Jesus condemns his opponents in 8:43:

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

Now, in fact, all four Gospels agree that Jesus engaged in heated controversy with other Jews and that he used some very severe language against them.<sup>11</sup> That by itself does not make Jesus or the Gospel writers anti-Semitic. After all, the Old Testament prophets – all of whom were Jewish – often denounced their own nation in graphic terms,<sup>12</sup> as does the thoroughly Jewish Apostle Paul.<sup>13</sup> The more significant point, however, is that unlike the prophets, and unlike Matthew, Luke

9 Similarly, Casey writes, “The rejection of those who reject the Son functions easily as a means of rejecting ‘the Jews’ and the accusation that their father is the devil is the kind of blanket polemic which lends itself to anything, however wicked” (1996: 228). As evidence, he cites examples of anti-Jewish commentary on John's Gospel from Cyril of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Martin Luther.

10 On this question, see especially Meyer, 2002, 129–173, 223–241, and Wright, 1996, 274–310.

11 Most notably in Matt. 23:1–36 // Luke 11:39–52.

12 See for example Isa. 48:1–8; Jer. 5:1–13; Ezek. 16:1–63.

13 See 1 Thess. 2:14–16.

and Paul, John does not balance this condemnation with any lament for Jerusalem or heartache for Jewish unbelief.<sup>14</sup> To describe John as anti-Semitic may be wide of the mark – he himself was a Jew – but might he be seen as coldly indifferent to the fate of his unbelieving compatriots? Even as sympathetic an interpreter of John as C.K. Barrett comments:

[The antagonism against the Jews in 8:12–58] is primarily due to a genuine theological understanding, for if the Jews who rejected Jesus were not right they were very wrong indeed. In perceiving this John sees clearly; but it is difficult to think that the writer of v.44 had ever felt towards Israel the love and longing of Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1 (Barrett, 197, 335).

The problem of Jesus' polemical language is compounded by John's repeated use of the term "the Jews" (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) as a synonym for those who do not believe in Jesus.<sup>15</sup> A striking example occurs in chapter 9 where it is written that Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, heals a man born blind (v. 1–7). The man is then questioned by some Pharisees about what had happened, leading to a dispute among them about Jesus (v. 13–17). All the characters thus far have been Jewish, but only at this point does John introduce the term οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι: "The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight" (v. 18). The parents, for their part, refuse to be drawn into the argument "because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue" (v. 22). To many readers, it looks as if John is using "the Jews" as a derogatory term for "unbelievers" – as offensive as it would be for a Palestinian Christian to refer to all non-Christians as "the Arabs". In fact, appearances here may be misleading; several scholars have argued that οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι means more specifically *Judeans*, as distinct from the mixed company of Jesus' disciples which included Galileans and Samaritans (Robinson, 1962: 118; Meeks, 1996: 330).<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as Meeks points out, when divorced from its original historical context, such rhetoric can acquire a far more sinister tone with disastrous results: "It would of course be unfair to hold the fourth evangelist responsible for the blood spilled and the gas chambers invented by late readers of his text, but neither may the postmodern reader forget" (Meeks, 1996, 320).

14 See, respectively, Jer. 4:19–21; 8:21–9:2; 14:17–22; Matt. 23:37–39 // Luke 13:34–35; Rom. 9:1–5; 10:1.

15 In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels which designate Jesus' opponents quite specifically, i.e., "the Pharisees", "the teachers of the law" or "the Sadducees".

16 Alternatively, Lincoln, 2000: 399, suggests that in designating non-believers "the Jews", John is simply letting them have a term they claimed for themselves, and turning it ironically against them.

## Reconsidering John's Ethical Vision

It should by now be clear why a number of scholars and readers judge the Fourth Gospel to be ethically deficient and possibly even dangerous. I understand their concerns, and I would agree that taken by itself, detached from the full canonical witness of Scripture, John's moral vision would indeed be inadequate. At the same time, however, I believe that alongside Deuteronomy, Amos and Romans, the Gospel of John has a vital contribution to make to the ethical formation of its readers, and in the rest of this paper I want to explain why.

First, while it is true that there is little explicit ethical teaching in John, the significance of Jesus' command that his disciples "love one another" should not be underestimated. To say, as Moody Smith does, that this "lacks specificity" is in fact not true; the love Jesus demands entails the laying down of one's life for others (15:13). If even this sounds somewhat vague, a pointer towards what it might mean in practice emerges at the end of the Gospel (21:15–19) where Jesus' three-fold instruction to Peter, "Feed / Tend my sheep", is immediately followed by a veiled warning of Peter's execution. What Jesus is calling for, therefore, is a pattern of sacrificial service to younger believers which will find its ultimate and even necessary expression in martyrdom.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as Nissen points out, if readers bear in mind the context of conflict between church and synagogue in which this Gospel was written, in which Christians would be constantly under pressure to renege and betray their fellow believers, then "its exhortations to love within the community sound less exclusive and more like an urgent appeal for unity within an oppressed minority" (Nissen, 1999, 211).<sup>18</sup> John is not so much restricting the command to love, as focusing it.

Secondly, Meeks' claim that John lacks ethical role models has to be rejected. As most commentators recognize, Jesus' action of washing the disciples' feet was socially revolutionary. Foot washing was the job of a slave.<sup>19</sup> To dismiss the significance of this action by comparing it with the Papal reenactment of it every year in the Vatican is facile precisely because it *is* a reenactment; the Pope is copying his Lord, not doing something unprecedented and shocking. It might

17 An idea captured perfectly in the final verse of Charles Wesley's hymn, *O Thou Who Camest From Above*: "Ready for all thy perfect will / My acts of faith and love repeat / Till death thine endless mercies seal / And make the sacrifice complete".

18 Nissen concludes that John is not so much restricting the command to love as focusing on it (Nissen, 1999, 211).

19 Thomas provides a detailed study of references to foot washing in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world (Thomas, 1991, 26–56) and concludes that "Jesus' action is unparalleled in ancient evidence, for no other person of superior status is described as voluntarily washing the feet of a subordinate" *Ibid.*, 59.



also be relevant to point out that the Pope has not come from heaven. Partly in reference to John 13, Richard Bauckham states:

Jesus made the demeaning service of women and slaves to their social superiors characteristic and therefore also emblematic of the role of leaders in the new kind of social group he was fashioning among his followers ... The reversal of status in effect abolishes distinctions of status between slaves, women, and free men, such that *διακονία* becomes the service that any do for any others in the community (John 13:14) (2002, 164–165).

Apart from the primary example of Jesus in John 13, however, John does give other role-models. In particular, as Bauckham remarks, the Fourth Gospel is “notable for its positive and vivid portraits of women as model disciples” (Bauckham, 2002, 283).<sup>20</sup> Early in the book, Jesus’ mother Mary instructs servants to “Do whatever he tells you” (2:5), thereby demonstrating the primary virtues of submission and trust. In chapter 4, a Samaritan woman becomes the paradigmatic missionary, sharing her experience and bringing others to hear Jesus (4:1–42).<sup>21</sup> While Meeks may be right to describe the *male* disciples in John as “mere foils to Jesus’ superior knowledge,” this cannot be said of Mary and Martha (11:1–12:11) whose initial trust in Jesus gives way to disappointment and questioning, only to be replaced by deepened faith and devotion – thoroughly believable models of Christian spirituality. Finally, in chapter 20, Mary Magdalene is the first to meet the risen Jesus (20:10–18) and commissioned to take the news of his resurrection to the other disciples, thereby effectively becoming the first apostle.

It might be argued that in all these cases, models of discipleship and spirituality are being presented rather than of ethical conduct in the strictest sense. However, what is significant is not only the actions of these women in the text, but also the ethical implications of a narrative in which women and men, Samaritans and Judeans, an experienced adulterer and a budding young theologian, are drawn together without privilege around the figure of Jesus. As Nissen puts it, “John’s vision is a vision of a community in which all are ‘friends of God’ ... a community free from social hierarchy and partiality” (1999, 212). Both in its own context and in today’s, the Fourth Gospel offers a truly egalitarian vision, and thus itself becomes an ethical model.

20 The prominence of women in John’s Gospel has been noted by many other scholars. See, however, the cautionary remarks of Maccini, 1996, 249–252, who reminds that John’s focus is on Jesus, not women. The point is well taken, but to say that John “shows no self-conscious interest whatsoever in the topic of women as such” (Maccini, 1996, 250) misses an important feature of the narrative.

21 Of course, in the very act of speaking with the woman (much to his disciples’ surprise), Jesus himself becomes an ethical model for John’s readers.

Thirdly, while it is true that John offers no lament for unbelieving Israel, this does not mean that he is coldly indifferent to Israel's fate. As Robinson argued forty years ago, part of John's interpretation of Jesus is as the eschatological "good shepherd" (10:1–18) (Robinson, 1962, 107–125). Here, Sunday School images of "the good shepherd" need to be put aside, and readers need remember that this is the one whom Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied would bring together the Diaspora, the scattered people of Israel (Jer. 23:1–6; Ezek. 34:11–31). The coming to faith of the Samaritan woman, and other people from her town, is one early and unmistakable sign of this "all-Israel" mission. It emerges again, cryptically, in Jesus' statement, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (10:16).

This vision of a restored nation finally becomes explicit in John 12. Here, immediately after Caiaphas' ironic statement – "It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (12:50) – John comments:

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (11:51–52).

Despite the harsh tones of the controversy with "the Jews", therefore, John sees Jesus' ultimate purpose to be nothing less than saving and unifying God's historic people. Putting this together with the idea of foot washing as true leadership, and women as model disciples, John has given a remarkably inclusive and egalitarian vision, paralleling Paul's credo that we are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Finally, what of the charge that John's ethic of love is exclusively for the Christian community and thus represents a timid unwillingness to "seek the welfare of the city" (Jer. 29:7) – or, as Houlden puts it, that "For John, the believer has no duties towards the world, but only towards those like himself are saved from it" (Houlden, 1975, 36)? A response to this could take one of two forms. On the one hand, it could be argued that whatever the lack of *explicit* social conscience, John's stunning affirmations that "the Word became flesh" (1:14) and that "God so loved the world" (3:16) *implicitly* provide the basis for it. According to Lincoln, John invites his readers

to see the story of the protagonist, Jesus, not as that of a witness and judge who is a stranger in the world but as that of a witness and judge who took on the flesh created through him, who claimed the world as his rightful possession, who experienced judgment from an alienated humanity, and who, in embracing their judgment, turned death into the source of life for the world. If this summary points in the right direction, it provides a rather different

picture of the stance of the Christian community toward the world from that painted by those who suggest the Fourth Gospel has a dualistic attitude that has written off the world and a sectarian ethos that simply looks inward and treats salvation as an experience of the individual in some spiritual sphere (2000, 261–262).

Yet it has to be admitted that John has made no attempt to flesh out such a world-affirming ethic; indeed, his stark duality of light and darkness hardly allows for a doctrine of common grace which would foster it. True, the disciples' seclusion with Jesus in the Upper Room is a *temporary* situation before they are sent out to continue their master's works (14:12–14; 15:16); but the chief purpose of those works, in John's view, has been to produce faith in Jesus rather than *shalom* in society. Carter's claim that they are being sent out "to proclaim, challenge, heal and feed, actions that confront a status quo contrary to God's purposes and enact transformation and justice expressive of God's life-giving purposes until Jesus returns" (2006, 215) seems to read too much into the text.<sup>22</sup>

An alternative, and I think more fruitful, response would be to recognize John's intrinsically *counter-cultural* nature and explore the value of this for a Christian social ethic (Meeks, 1996, 322; Nissen, 1999, 208). According to Meeks, "While we cannot plausibly speak of this group's having a sense of 'mission' to the world in the aggressive and optimistic sense in which modern Christianity has used that word, it does see itself as presenting, by its own very existence and its own countercultural form of life, 'testimony' to the world" (1996, 322). Here lies a genuinely subversive stance that dares to reject the assumptions, values, claims and methods of Jerusalem and Rome, and thus "speak truth to power".<sup>23</sup> To be sure, in more open societies, this is not the *only* role Christians can play, and by itself it would fall short of the Christian calling. A separatist community is, however, free to offer uncompromising critique while showing an alternative that is truly alternative. To ignore the gods is to dethrone them, and the way of silence may be better than negotiation; this may explain Jesus' refusal to engage with his interrogators (18:19–23; 33–37). Rensberger sees the matter clearly:

22 As Houlden remarks regarding the authors of the Johannine corpus, "No writer has less interest in the sanctifying of ordinary life than these ... This is not to say that theological principles implicit in these writings may not lead, by a certain route, to applications quite unlike any that the authors could have envisaged; that is another matter. The exegetical point is that they did not formulate those principles with the application we have mentioned anywhere near their minds" (1975, 41).

23 "The countercultural stance of a community that sees itself (absurdly, in the world's eyes) as a remnant of healthy tissue in the world's cancerous body inevitably has political consequences" (Meeks, 1996, 323).

No religion that sees itself as the backbone of a society, as the glue that holds a society together, can easily lay down a challenge to that society's wrongs. A cultural religion is all too readily told to mind its own business, because it has a business, a well-known role in maintaining society's fabric unmolested. It is the sect, which has no business in the world, that is able to represent a fundamental challenge to the world's oppressive orders (Rensberger, 1988, 142, *italics his*; cited in Meeks, 1996, 325).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show that doubts about the ethical value of John's Gospel are in fact misplaced. Both through commandment and personal example, Jesus establishes an egalitarian community which is to be marked by mutual, trusting, self-giving love – exactly the qualities that characterize the egalitarian community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even though John's ethic is oriented inwards to the church rather than outwards to the world, it nonetheless has important social and political implications.

To be sure, the constant danger for a counter-cultural community is that it may become *very* "counter", and lapse into an unattractive defensiveness. Even the evangelical scholar Andrew Lincoln accepts that John contains "a potentially poisonous deposit" (2000: 415), adding that believers must guard against the "temptation to reciprocate the hostility of the world" (Lincoln, 2000, 417).<sup>24</sup> But this is simply to recognize that any Christian self-understanding *via-a-vis* the world carries a risk. Those who take a more integrationist "salt and light" ethic must (as Jesus warned) be vigilant against compromise and loss of the cutting edge (Matt. 5:13–16).

The ethical vision of the Fourth Gospel, in other words, is vital, but partial. It needs to be enlarged and interpreted by other scriptural perspectives, such as the creation and wisdom traditions and the Pauline corpus. Such canonical partners will then not only supplement John, but allow readers to see more clearly the implications of his own theology for a Christian social ethic. As Lincoln points out:

The particular challenge of the Fourth Gospel is to the witness of service that helps to bond the believing community, but clearly, *within the light of the NT*

24 He adds: "Given the history of misuse of this Gospel's discourse, readers who find themselves in very different circumstances from those reflected in its narrative have no option other than continual vigilance lest its clear-cut categories of 'believers' over against 'the world,' instead of making sense of an exclusion by others, now become employed to write off others as excluded from God's offer of well-being and life" (Lincoln, 2000, 417).

*as a whole*, such witness will also extend to the neighbour, as an expression of solidarity with whoever is needy, distressed, or oppressed (2000: 457, italics his).

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## **Je li *Ivanovo Evanđelje* etički manjkavo?**

### Sažetak

U ovome se radu raspravlja i evaluira rašireno stajalište da *Ivanovo evanđelje* ima malu etičku vrijednost te da možda čak potiče antisemitizam. Rasprava dokazuje kako takve kritike nisu opravdane i da Ivan zapravo zagovara vrstu jedinstva, uzajamnog povjerenja i požrtvornosti koji su sigurno bili neophodni među vjernicima u vrijeme sukoba između crkve i sinagoge. Isusova spremnost oprati noge učenicima, ravnopravna narav evanđelja, i paradigmatička zajednica Oca, Sina i Duha, prepoznati su kao uzori za vrstu ljubavi koju Isus zapovijeda. Iako je etički fokus *Ivanova evanđelja* u biti okrenut prema unutra, on predstavlja temelj za prepoznatljivu kršćansku kontrakulturu i ima važne društvene i političke implikacije. U zaključku se ističe da iako je *Ivanova etička vizija* ograničena i omogućuje pogrešnu primjenu, to se može izbjeći njezinim tumačenjem u svjetlu ostalih biblijskih perspektiva.